

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 641

RC 014 513

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TITLE Training Special Educators to Teach in Rural Areas:
Special Problems and Recommendations for Program
Development.
INSTITUTION Lynchburg Coll., Va.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative
Services (ED), Washington, DC. Div. of Personnel
Preparation.
PUB DATE 84
GRANT G0008301308
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Delivery Systems; Educational Environment;
Educational Finance; Educational Research; Elementary
Secondary Education; Faculty Mobility; *Program
Development; *Rural Areas; *Rural Environment; Rural
Urban Differences; Special Education; *Special
Education Teachers; *Teacher Education; Teacher
Recruitment; Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Education for All Handicapped Children Act; Rural
Culture

ABSTRACT

A review of the existing literature on preparation of rural teaching personnel focuses on the problems of education and specifically, special education, in rural areas and reports various solutions to those problems. Characteristics of many rural areas (such as high non-enrollment rates, rising service costs, resistance to outside interference, geographic isolation, low salaries, high unemployment, local pride, provincialism, lack of comprehensive human services, and limited educational resources) combine to create severe teacher recruitment and retention problems. In addition to facing the general problems of rural education, rural teachers of learning disabled, severely handicapped, and sensory impaired children are isolated in the service delivery system and must integrate information and knowledge from a variety of fields without the help of support personnel. Rural districts alleviate the resulting shortages in trained personnel in many ways, including offering extension, in-service, off-campus, and summer training courses; providing consultants; employing and training local residents; providing programming based on needs assessment; providing broad-based training across handicapped populations; supplying professional support systems; organizing practica; waiving training tuition; offering training stipends; and developing realistic rural curricula. Teacher preparation curricula should tie competencies, objectives, and activities to rural problems and their solutions.
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ED238641

Training Special Educators to Teach
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Special Problems and Recommendations
for Program Development

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ABSTRACT

Rural areas present unique problems that must be dealt with by personnel preparation programs whose students are currently working or will be likely to seek employment in such regions. The specific problems identified in the literature on rural education are reviewed with particular attention given to variables most significant for programs in special education. Recommendations for structuring personnel preparation programs in response to these problems are then provided.

Acknowledgement

The preparation of this manuscript was supported in part by a grant from the Division of Personnel Preparation, Special Education Programs, U. S. Department of Education (G0008301308).

Reports of teacher surpluses across numerous certification areas have been common through the late 1970s and early 1980s. Such reports, while reflecting general, regional, national, and perhaps state trends, however often fail to differentiate those areas which have both traditionally and/or recently experienced significant difficulties in the recruitment and retention of appropriately trained and fully certified personnel. In particular rural areas have been among the foremost sub-regions within the country to experience such problems.

Staffing problems forecasted by projected trends in personnel preparation are viewed with alarm by school divisions where increases in handicapped student population coupled with highly publicized disincentives for teaching have tended to exacerbate the problem of finding qualified personnel for rural areas. Recent remarks by Sontag (Sontag, Button, & Hagerty, 1982) pointed to the problems of anticipating personnel needs and the subsequent responses of "... providing temporary or emergency certification to teachers..., to lower the standards of certification, or to enlarge the parameters of acceptable training or experience required for certain positions" (p. 11). Although these types of policy responses are common at the national or state level, the recourse at the local level to shortages is often the employment of unqualified or underqualified personnel. Sontag et al (1982) continued by referring to the "...rather critical teacher shortage situation confronting special education at this time..." which they indicated would be compounded by a "...further erosion in the relative availability of teachers needed to meet the

requirements for a free and appropriate public education" (p. 16). Rural areas present a particularly significant concern vis-a-vis this general forecast.

In addition to the basic two dimensional problem of recruitment and retention common to these geographical areas, rural programs also present other distinct difficulties in service delivery. Specific problems include the availability of programs for low incidence handicapping conditions in sparsely populated areas, the cultural factors unique to particular regions, and the relative status of education within the structure of the community.

In order to deal with the unique types of problems within rural areas, personnel preparation programs which have assumed responsibility for such areas must consider how their training efforts need to be modified in order to be responsive to the realities of these areas. The purposes of this paper are therefore to review the existing literature on rural personnel preparation with particular focus on the training of special educators and to provide recommendations for appropriate modifications of programs. While the primary focus of the paper is on preservice training, it reflects the governmental designation as preservice (c.f., Saettler, 1982) and thus includes preparation programs for those individuals currently in instructional situations despite their lack of prior appropriate training and credentials.

Rural Special Education

The Education of All Handicapped Children Law (PL 94-142) has no doubt greatly enhanced the status of many public school programs across the country in general and in rural areas in particular. Nevertheless rural programs demand special attention since virtually

all aspects of the law (e.g. parent involvement, IEP development, due process) create significant problems for programs in these settings (Helge, 1981c). High non-enrollment rates, mounting service costs, resistance to outside interference, and serious teacher recruitment and retention problems are just a few of the issues that require attention (McCann, Pippin, & Sherman, 1980).

Rural communities often include problems related to the socio-economic and cultural traditions and geographic factors unique to these areas. Financial problems (i.e. low tax bases, high unemployment, and poverty) are compounded by high costs for special education services. The latter is then increased by geographic and rural terrain factors that result in transportation costs for long trips of students and staff, equipment and specialized personnel. College instructors attempting to serve these areas must often deal with therefore "...long distance, primitive accommodations, and idiosyncratic community environments" (Kelly & Vanvactor, 1983, p. 147).

Rural areas may frequently be resistant to any kind of change that appears as outside interference. Pride in traditions is often high and consequently new concepts or new regulations may be slowly accepted, if they are at all. Some systems may hesitate to accept the federal funds for education, because they do not want to comply. Provincialism in rural communities can thus be both a strength and a weakness (Hutinger et al., 1981). Other communities may question the level of special education expenditures because of doubt as to whether handicapped persons will ever become productive members of society.

Rural areas are often lacking in any type of comprehensive human service programs and resources that are more commonly in place in

urban areas. The rural school staff is therefore often expected to serve many functions and be specialists in diverse areas of education. Parents may view the school staff as experts and thus may be hesitant to be involved. Vasa and Steckelberg (1981) noted some special problems confronting special educators in rural areas which included: inflexible school schedules, minimal curricular offerings, need for cooperative programming, limited libraries, and lack of contact with other teachers in the same field.

Finally, recruiting and retaining qualified staff to educate handicapped children are major problems for local education agencies. The effective implementation of the tenets of federal law in rural areas can only be achieved by having trained personnel available. This situation represents a constant and continuing problem to divisions committed to upgrading their services. Helge (1981b), elaborating on this problem in staffing, reported that 94% of surveyed states indicated that recruiting and retaining qualified staff to educate handicapped children were major concerns for rural local education agencies. Many state officials expressed serious doubts that this problem could be solved without modification of current certification regulations. Social isolation, cultural differences, extreme weather conditions, inadequate housing and low salaries created conditions which made it particularly difficult to employ special education staff in these schools.

Compounding the problem has been the fact that many teachers employed are young, uncertified and inexperienced and may abandon their rural positions as soon as openings occur in suburban or urban areas. High attrition rates have serious consequences for personnel

development and qualify instruction for handicapped learners. Some states estimated an annual teacher turnover of 40%-50% (Helge, 1982) which would yield virtually a complete turnover triennially.

The above noted findings serve to support and reinforce similar results from an Rural Network Conference Planning Survey. Recruiting staff for rural areas was the second most critical problem found in the survey, second only to that of transportation (Hutinger et al, 1981).

Recruiting educational personnel in very specialized fields is especially critical with problems increased in rural areas. Learning disabilities (LD) programs in many school systems have been a relatively recent occurrence with students often previously remaining in a regular classroom or served in educable mentally retarded (EMR) classes. The LD teacher in a rural setting is frequently an itinerant specialist. She must therefore serve many students in multiple schools throughout the system and thus must engage in an unusual amount of travel time. Monitoring these programs is difficult.

Many of the same problems that teachers of the learning disabled face are also experienced by the educator of the severely/profoundly handicapped and those charged with teaching children with sensory impairments. The low incidence of such handicaps in the schools often results in teachers becoming islands within the service delivery system. Because of the highly specialized role the special educator of low incidence handicaps must therefore provide, he must integrate information and knowledge from a variety of fields such as occupational and physical therapy, medicine, communications, social work, community services and behavior management and often provide services when no

support personnel are available. In addition, caseloads may often include a mix of students with a wide range of severity of handicap (Helge, 1981a).

Approaches to Personnel Problems

Given the various problems experienced in rural special education, it is illustrative to review some of the approaches that have been used to alleviate shortages in trained personnel. A summary of these efforts follows:

- extension courses offered to teachers in rural areas (Hulbright, 1974).
- in-service training through outreach programs (Smith & Pasternak, 1977).
- on-site summer training classes (Smith & Pasternak, 1977).
- training consultants to work in their own rural school systems (McKenzie, Hill, Sousie, York, & Baker, 1977).
- consultation to teachers combined with direct involvement with handicapped students.
- modification of existing preservice programs to include more rural emphasis.
- off-campus seminars in rural areas, local practica, and activities on the college campus provided to permanent residents of rural systems who have a commitment to enhancing local education (Gabel, 1979).
- the employment of local residents and the subsequent training of them on the job (Hutinger, et al., 1981).
- programming based on a needs assessment process that involved all constituencies (Cohen, 1981).
- broad-based training across handicapped populations that alerts teachers to the heterogenous population to be

served (Ferrara, Hirshoren, Levin, 1982; Ferrara, Hirshoren, & Levin, 1983).

- personnel support system to assist in maintaining the professional in the community (Casto, 1981).
- practica experiences including an opportunity to teach within the rural environment (Helge, 1981a) or, if teachers are already employed, on-site practica as an effective alternative.
- tuition waivers and stipends for teachers recommended by school divisions for training programs (Ferrara et al., 1982).
- training of resource consultants as a provision for a system of ongoing direct and indirect service to students that will be more effective than one-shot in-service programs (Vasa & Steckelberg, 1981).
- curriculum to reflect the realities of the rural environment and the unique benefits and problems of teaching in such areas with instructors demonstrating an understanding of the social, educational, and personal values of program participants (Kelly & Vanvactor, 1983).

Concluding Comments

A host of specific suggestions are inherent in the above review of the literature on programs designed for rural areas. In addition, projects geared to such regions should also consider other incentives to attract staff to rural areas such as competitive salaries, community respect and prestige, staff development plans including the opportunity to obtain college credit while on the job, professional

leave to attend classes, and tuition and mileage grants. Successful training should include courses at the learning institutions plus courses provided within the rural school systems. An essential element is the addition of special rural problems and solutions to their objectives.

A 1980 briefing paper from the Special Education Programs branch of the U. S. Department of Education stressed that strategies designed to address critical rural personnel shortages should use existing facilities and resources, be consistent with certification guidelines for those to be prepared, include a substantial amount of training and be integrated with practicum experiences (Helge, 1981b). A revised approach to curriculum is recommended so that competencies, objectives and activities can be tied to rural problems and problem solving. Effective rural models used in other parts of the country should be studied to aid in the development of effective models for a given locality.

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